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CHRISTINE'S INSPIRATION

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Christine's Inspiration

BY

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"But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

CHRISTINE'S INSPIRATION.

CHRISTINE BROWNLOW came to the city determined to work hard, and she carried out her intention without flinching. A great sorrow had suddenly come to her when there seemed to be every prospect of a great joy, and, as such trials sometimes will, turned the sweetness of her nature to bitterness, and made a change in her life necessary; so she left her home, and came to the big city to work off alone some of the bitter hardness that threatened to pervert her whole nature.

Her means being as small as her ambition was great, she contented herself with a little room at the top

of a lodging-house in a respectable but very unfashionable neighborhood —a bare room, whose only merit lay in its large skylight, which took the place of a window, and which, while it let in more cold air than was always comfortable in a living room, also admitted great patches of sunshine, making the place a good studio. And here Christine painted day after day, when she was not at her class, finishing first some winter scenes that she had brought with her, views of various points of interest in her country home, painted with an accuracy of detail, a delicacy of finish, that ought to have commanded a higher price than they brought.

Lent had begun, Easter would soon be near. "Look out for something original," said the old picture-dealer, who had sold several small

views for her, and who, in a dry, business-like way, had a liking for the odd, gray-eyed girl. "Look up something, and paint it as well as you have these others, and perhaps I can find you a buyer for it."

"Easier said than done," thought Christine, as day after day passed and no inspiration came to her. In vain she went to sleep and rose up with the idea; nothing original occurred to her; her golden opportunity was slipping by without her being able to grasp it, and she was feeling very discouraged the afternoon she came home and found Billy sitting on the stair by her door. The hall was so dark that she almost stumbled over him. "Who are you?" she demanded, a little sharply, trying to get her key into the door. "And what are you doing here?"

"I'm Billy; our room's awful dark an' tole, an' I tome out here to wait for my muzzer," was the prompt and succinct reply of the unknown.

By this time the door was opened, the gas lighted, and Christine, turning to view her visitor, held her breath with admiration. He was about three and a half or four years old, with an exquisite baby face, pink and white coloring that suggested delicacy of constitution, great, solemn, dark blue eyes that looked black in the gaslight, a pathetic little mouth showing a gleam of pearly teeth between the parted lips, and yellow hair like spun silk that turned up round his white forehead and hung over his shoulders in loose curls. A small red shawl was tied across his shoulders, and round his waist, over a shabby blue dress; faded stockings

and a pair of much-worn shoes completed his costume.

"You small creature," cried Christine, "did you drop from heaven? Where are your wings? And how long do you intend remaining with us?"

The solemn eyes gazed wide-opened at her. "I ain't dot no win's," he said, shaking his small head until his curls fairly danced. "I'se Billy—muzzer's boy. I live dere," he pointed through the open door to a room on the opposite side of the landing. And then Christine remembered that she had seen a couple of trunks and a child's shabby rocking chair going into that room when she went out the day before. Billy and his "muzzer" must be her new neighbors.

She asked the little man to sit

down, which he did on a small foot-stool of home manufacture, gravely watching her light her fire, draw her curtain over the skylight, put the small Japanese teapot on the stove, and lay the cloth on the end of a table crowded with books, unfinished pictures, and odds and ends of all descriptions. Besides her own, Christine laid a little cup which had been hers as a child, and which mother had packed up for the sake of the home remembrance it might call up. It was white, with tiny rosebuds over it, and evidently met the little boy's approval, for he said "pitty" when it appeared.

When the brown bread and butter and home-made jam were all on the table, and the teapot giving out a fragrant steam, Christine said, "Billy, will you take tea with me?"

Billy hesitated. "Muzzer didn't say no?" he said, appealing to his hostess; he was struggling between inclination and a sense of possible duty.

"Of course she didn't," answered Christine, briskly, and when she improvised a high chair out of the footstool and another chair, he allowed himself to be persuaded to remain. His quaint baby talk did her good, and she was laughing the first hearty laugh for months, when a knock came on the door and a slender, dark-haired woman entered, at sight of whom the child slipped down, running to meet her. "Her ast me, muzzer," he said, in explanation of his position, which statement Christine hastened to confirm, trying to set her visitor at ease. The facts of the case soon came out. Mrs. Lindley was a

widow who supported herself and her little boy by sewing. She had a sad face, which with her black dress, told of recent bereavement.

To earn enough for their support she had to be away from Billy for many hours, which was an additional sorrow, as she passionately loved her little boy. "I know it's not good for him to be so much alone," she concluded, "but what can I do?" In a few minutes she went away, taking the child with her.

As Christine washed her dishes, an idea evolved itself in her brain, and as she put away the last one she clasped her hands together with a deep drawn breath—"After all, Billy may prove to be my inspiration!" She placed a fresh block of canvas on her easel, and went to bed anxious for the morrow's sun.

She petitioned Mrs. Lindley that she might have Billy with her every day while his mother was out, but for some inexplicable reason said nothing about her intention to paint him. The little fellow was very content to be with her, and Christine worked rapidly while he talked or played. Some of his sayings startled her by their quaintness and pathos, and as the picture grew under her quick fingers, reproducing little Billy's angelic face on the canvas, she realized the extreme delicacy of the child, and a premonition of further sorrow for the poor mother grew upon her.

She was delighted with her work so far, and invited the old picture-dealer to see her "inspiration," as she called it. He came, glancing critically from the beautiful child, who sat on his footstool gazing solemnly at

him, to the exquisite half-finished picture on the easel. "Fine, very fine," he said, with a gesture of satisfaction. "Finish that as you've begun it, and it will give you a name, and I will promise you a buyer for it as soon as it is ready."

Christine appreciated this praise, for she knew he was usually scant of commendation, and worked hard to get it finished for Easter week. It was almost completed when an unexpected telegram called her home; she was unavoidably detained nearly a week, and returned to find a great sorrow had fallen on her opposite neighbor. Little Billy had been very ill for several days, and now lay still and white in his mother's room, his small waxen hands folded on his breast. The golden hair still clustered lovingly round the blue-veined

brow, but the beautiful eyes were closed forever in this world; the quaint baby tongue silenced. The broken-hearted mother rocked herself to and fro in a dumb despair that touched Christine more than the most violent demonstrations of grief could have done. She, too, felt the little fellow's death keenly, and turned his picture to the wall that she might not see the pathetic eyes that seemed to follow her all about her room. Little Billy was laid to rest beside his father, and the lonely mother took up her life again; but the stony misery that looked out of her eyes was terrible to witness, and she grew paler day by day.

One evening, two weeks before Easter, Christine crossed to Mrs. Lindley's with a bunch of spring flowers, daffodils and daisies, hoping the sight of the pretty things, with their

sweet, green odor, would do her good. She heard a low moaning, and as her knock remained unanswered, she opened the door and stepped into the room. Mrs. Lindley sat with her head in her hands, moaning. The face she lifted to Christine was white and drawn, the eyes glittering with unshed tears. "Tell me," she cried, vehemently, "what did my boy look like? I close my eyes and see your face, the faces of people I have met a few times, people I take no interest in; but I can't see a feature of my darling's face, I can't see the color of his eyes, or his hair—his pretty hair; his face is a blank in my memory. I shall go mad if this lasts much longer, I have *forgotten* his dear face! What shall I do? Oh, my baby! my baby!"

"Have you no likeness of him?"

asked her visitor, in a constrained voice.

"None," answered Billy's mother, bitterly. "It was always just from hand to mouth; we had no money to spare for such luxuries—our only child, too. I thought of it sometimes, he was so beautiful. You are an artist—Why did you not paint him? Surely he was lovely enough for an angel."

She dropped her head in her hands again and moaned. Christine answered not a word: she had grown very pale; a hard expression was on her lips; she laid the flowers on a table and left the room She locked her door, and by the light of the dying afternoon sun looked long and critically at her work. The exquisite baby face looked out at her from its wreath of Easter lilies; to Christine's

excited fancy the blue eyes gazed reproachfully at her. "I don't care," she cried, defiantly, "the picture is mine; I conceived it, I worked it out. It is mine, mine, and no one shall force me to give it up." But she could not sleep that night, the cry, "I shall go mad if this lasts," repeating itself in her brain until she was thankful to see the morning light. For the next few days she painted with her door locked, carefully turning the picture to the wall at night; she would not bear the reproachful look of those eyes any longer than was absolutely necessary. Christine was fighting a battle with her better self in these days. She tried to time her going out and coming in so as to avoid meeting Mrs. Lindley.

On Wednesday of Holy Week, the dealer and a gentleman called to see

the picture, which was nearly finished. The stranger appeared much impressed with Christine's "inspiration," and the dealer told her later that he was almost confident he would buy it, so she agreed it should be sent for on Saturday noon. On Thursday afternoon, after a steady day's work, a desperate fit of restlessness fell on her; the last gleams of the sun were disappearing behind the houses when she locked her door and started for a tramp. Two feelings were struggling within her, and everything she looked at appealed to one or the other emotion. She stepped into an old book store to turn the current of her thoughts; the first book she opened was a volume of sermons. The text of the first was, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." She closed the book

hastily, and opened the next, which was a novel. The title page bore the line, "The first great lesson of life is renunciation." With a scowl she slammed the cover to and left the store, but the echo of the words was with her yet, and pursued her up and down the streets as she walked rapidly along, seeing nothing of her surroundings until night fell and the lamps had long been lighted; then a quick, sharp rain began to fall, and Christine ran for shelter into the vestibule of a small building that attracted her eye. It was so small a building, with so small a vestibule, that, standing in it, she could distinctly hear every word that a man inside was saying in a low, earnest voice to some other men who sat on benches before him.

The man stood on a raised platform, on which was a simple reading-

desk; back of this were some dark red portières throwing into relief a simple wooden cross. "A church," thought Christine, catching her breath. She was tempted to go out in the rain; in her present mood she was afraid of what she might hear; but it was pouring—she could not afford to get wet, so she remained.

"And after that night in Gethsemane," continued the earnest voice, "after the terrible emotion that drew great drops of blood to the Saviour's brow, came the arrest in the morning light, when all forsook Him and fled. Those whom He had loved and chosen, those who had promised allegiance to Him, left Him in His hour of need, to die alone, without the common justice we give to a criminal in these days. Picture, if you can, the mockery of the trial that ensued;

the cowardly judge, afraid to oppose the angry people, condemning an innocent man! Think of the indignities He suffered, the mockery of the purple robe! the cruel crown of thorns! Think of the impious wretches who dared to strike their Lord! dared to spit in His face!" The speaker's voice shook with intense feeling. "Oh, I fancy the angels in heaven must have hid their faces and wept for those poor, lost men. Then the long, weary walk under a hot Eastern sun, burdened with His heavy cross, and after that the agony of the death upon the cross, the dying cry of anguish, the piercing spear! Your Lord, my Lord, God Almighty's dear Son, dying this shameful death that we might be saved. Oh, dear men and brothers, is it too much to ask that we make some self-sacrifice for

Him this week? That we think of Him with prayer to-morrow? 'A man can do no more than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' Remembering the agony of Calvary, the Precious Life that was there laid down for us, and all that it has brought us, let us each practise some self-denial, do some act of kindness this week, as a token of our love, our gratefulness, to the dear Christ."

Christine had always prided herself on not being impressionable, but tears were running fast down her cheeks as she sped through the pouring rain, and for the first time in her life "Christ, the Son of the living God," became an actual, personal presence to her, and the story of Calvary stirred her heart to its depths.

She prayed that night as she had never before prayed, rising up pale

and exhausted, but possessing a peace that had been absent from her for months. Going over, she turned the picture to the light. "I'm not afraid of your eyes now, Billy boy," she said, softly, "for with God's help I am prepared to render unto mother the thing that is mother's. And perhaps some day I may have strength to thank Him that He permitted the sacrifice. But now I'm weak, Billy, very weak; and I'll have to go away, or I may fall into temptation again, and try to filch my offering from the altar whereon I have laid it. Yes, I must go away."

She went out Friday morning before eleven o'clock, not returning until late in the afternoon. There were signs of tears about her eyes, but peace still reigned. That evening she packed her trunk and all her possessions. It was late when she fin-

ished, and in the stillness of the night she could hear Billy's mother moaning, but the sound of her grief did not irritate the girl as it had done; she glanced at the baby face on the easel and smiled—a smile full of pity and self-abnegation.

Saturday morning she stopped at an express office and made arrangements to have her trunk taken away that afternoon, then she went to a picture store, purchased a simple frame of ash wood, and had an interview with the dealer who had promised to dispose of her "inspiration." He expostulated warmly with her, but evidently to no effect, for he cried angrily, as she walked away, "She's as crazy as a loon. Fit for a lunatic asylum!"

Easter morn dawned bright and warm, the sky as blue as azure, and Christine could hear the birds chat-

tering under the eaves of the house as she dressed.

Billy's mother stood at her window, gazing up into the heavens where her darling had gone. She was white and thin, a hard, defiant light in the eyes that used to look so gentle—a contrast to the girl who entered her room after a hasty knock. There was a chastened peace in the shining eyes that illuminated her whole countenance, and attracted even Mrs. Lindley's weary regard. Christine advanced. "Please look out of the window for a moment," she said, with a sweet smile, "I will tell you when to turn."

Listlessly the mother obeyed. "Now," cried Christine, and she turned; the visitor was gone, but on the lounge, lighting up the worn haircloth covering and the dingy wall

C. BUNNELL '92

against which it leaned, was a picture of her lost darling. Just the head and shoulders, floating in an azure background. Easter lilies from the four corners leaned lovingly forward as if anxious to touch the exquisite baby face. It was a perfect likeness, and the poor mother stood spellbound for a few minutes, going eagerly over each feature; she leaned forward to caress the yellow curls, drawing in her breath with a sobbing sound; then the flood-gates of her grief were unlocked, and falling on her knees before the picture, the blessed tears rained down her face. "God *has* remembered me after all. Oh, my baby! my baby!" she sobbed.

In the edge of the frame was stuck a scrap of paper on which was written, "God has mercifully allowed me the opportunity to paint this picture,

and I give it to you praying it may comfort you in your great sorrow."

. . . . . .

Later on, when her grief was somewhat spent, she went over to her neighbor's; the door opened to her touch, the room was empty; the bareness struck her with a misgiving. "Yes," said her landlady, in answer to her query, "Miss Brownlow has gone away for good. She did not say where to, and I didn't ask. But she particularly told me to give you her love if you should ask about her."

The two women never met again on earth. The struggle and self-abnegation of the one, the gratefulness and renewed courage of the other, were never expressed to each other, but "He that planted the ear, shall He not hear? He that formed the eye, shall He not see?"

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